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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 VATICAN 000204

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PTER](#) [VT](#) [TU](#) [KIRF](#)
SUBJECT: POPE'S TURKEY TRIP STILL ON CALENDAR

REF: A. Vatican 199
[1](#)B. Vatican 201
[1](#)C. 05 VATICAN 515

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CLASSIFIED BY: Peter Martin, Pol/Econ Chief, Vatican, State.
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) The Turkish DCM to the Holy See told Charge September 20 that the controversy over the pope's remarks in Regensburg (ref a,b) would not derail his November visit to Turkey. She noted controversy surrounding the visit and outlined the itinerary. Meanwhile, other sources described how the Regensburg controversy has created a problem for pro-EU Turks. Another loser is said to be Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew. The trip was originally slated to focus on the Orthodox Church, but will now have another shadow over it. The papal speech has complicated the already difficult landscape of Turkish-Holy See relations. End Summary.

DCM: Visit is On

[1](#)2. (C) Confirming media reports, Turkish DCM to the Holy See Deniz Kilicer told Charge September 20 that the controversy over the pope's remarks in Regensburg (ref a,b) would not derail the pope's planned November visit to Turkey. She stressed the importance of the visit to both Turkey and the Holy See. The pope will begin with a stop in Ankara, where he will meet the president (the PM will be away). He will also visit Izmir, near what tradition recognizes as the house of the Virgin Mary; and Istanbul, where he will meet Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew on the Feast of St. Andrew, visit an island nearby with historical Christian significance, and visit the famous former Orthodox shrine, Hagia Sophia - now a museum with Islamic symbols mingling with Byzantine mosaics.

13. (C) Kilicer noted what has been widely reported in Vatican-based media -- that some Turks oppose the visit to the Hagia Sophia on the grounds that it would be inappropriate for the pope to pray there; the building was constructed as a church and remains one of the most famous shrines in the world. But it was later converted into a mosque. Though it is currently a museum, Islamic symbols still mingle with Byzantine icons. Some, Kilicer said, want to restore it to a mosque. She has argued that the pope should and will pray there, as pious Christians do in any holy site.

Danger for Pope?

14. (C) The Catholic Bishops Conference of Turkey has said publicly that it sees no reason to call off the pope's visit. There is nevertheless considerable anger at the pope for the remarks, as expressed (for example) by employees of Ankara's Diyanet, or Directorate General for Religious Affairs. Kilicer noted as well that the Vatican itself is quite concerned about the pope's security during the visit. Ironically, Mehmet Ali Agca - the Turk who shot Pope John Paul II in 1981 - has now warned Pope Benedict that he won't be safe in Turkey.

Former Ambassador to Turkey Weighs in

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15. (C) Meanwhile, Darko Tanaskovic, Ambassador of Serbia and Montenegro to the Holy See (a scholar of Islam and former Serbian Ambassador to Turkey), told us (protect) September 21 that he agreed with reported comments by a Turkish official that Turkey couldn't guarantee the pope's safety if he went through with the planned trip. There are a lot of people there who don't want Turkey to become part of Europe, Tanaskovic said, and there are certainly extremists among them. According to Tanaskovic, the Regensburg incident won't help the Turks who are backing EU entry, no matter how it plays out. Another loser, he said, was the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew. The trip was originally slated to focus on the Orthodox Church in the former Constantinople. Now, the pope will be compelled to devote substantial attention to the current controversy.

Comment

16. (C) Ref (c) noted former Turkish DCM Ali Riza Ozcoskun's disillusionment with Turkish-Holy See relations and the complications of their relationship. This incident doesn't make things easier. One Catholic ambassador to the Holy See took his Turkish colleague to task for the comments noted above on the dangers the pope would face on his visit -- a statement this ambassador saw as inflammatory. Referring to Agca's 1981

assassination attempt on Pope John Paul II, he told the Turks (and another ambassador from a Muslim country) that in light of this history, the Turks should be wary of dark suggestions of violence. Tanaskovic confirmed much of what we heard from former DCM Ozcoskun: the Holy See - Turkish relationship is necessary for the Turks, but full of problems. Many have a hard time reconciling relations between a secular state and the Vatican. Recent events have given ammunition to both secular and religious opponents of these relations.

SANDROLINI